THE INCORRUPTIBLE ONE

A Story By Mildred Cram

JOHN PETERSON was disturbed. His bushy yellow eyebrows were drawn together in a terrific frown. His clear blue eyes—eyes usually as serene as a summer sea—were troubled. He walked majestically away from the Esplanade, followed a narrow, winding street for a short distance and entered his own doorway with a sigh of relief. It was blistering hot, so he went through the house to the veranda, where there was at least a breath of air and the green shadow of tropical trees and bushes.

"Queer," he said under his breath. "Mighty queer. As like as two pennies. And yet—twenty years."

He put his big straw hat on the floor and stretched himself at length in a wicker armchair. Perspiration stood on his brow and his hands trembled. He kept licking his lips as if they tasted of salt. But his huge body was motionless, and he gazed steadily into the brilliant, tangled garden, not as if he were seeing the waxlike flowers and prodigious palms, but as if his eyes were fixed on some invisible scene that fascinated and terrified him.

"Queer," he muttered again. "As like as two pennies."

And yet nothing out of the ordinary had happened to John Peterson. He had gone out, following his usual custom, at 11 o'clock and had strolled as far as the Piazza Independenzia, keeping always in the shadow of the houses. He was very imposing in his white linen clothes—a huge, blonde fellow, bearded like a viking, his eyes as blue as ice beneath their shaggy brows. The shouting drivers of dilapidated cabs swerved sharply out of the way to avoid him. Barefooted mozos gave him the narrow sidewalk with a subservient courtesy. Big-eyed, black-haired native girls looked slyly at him as he passed. All this was exactly as usual. Peterson was accustomed to being admired. Was he not the incorruptible banker of Magella, a rich citizen and a figure of national importance?

He began the day, like all other days with a glass of brandy at the Cafe Albion. Various dapper, copper-colored young men tipped their straw hats in his direction, and some white-haired royalist officials, sweltering in frock coats and gloves, bowed very low as they passed his table. Peterson "stood in" with the royalists. They had been in power for several years, and it began to look as if President Diego were a permanent fixture in the old white palace which fronted so conspicuously on the piazza. Magella was growing great. The Fairchild Company, an American syndicate, controlled the fabulous mines of the Santa Christina. The Marias were enriching the royalists. And a Yankee railway was pushing across the campagna, across the half-deserted interior of Concordia, linking Magella to the rest of the world. Decidedly it was best to stand in with the party in power. Peterson handled the modest fortunes that were being made by Diego followers; he even accepted for safekeeping, in the manner of bankers the world over, the savings of native workmen, European settlers, that army of nondscripts which had drifted into the wake of North American capital.

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PETERSON had lived in Magella twenty years and had walked the narrow white line of moral rectitude. He had married a Magellan woman—a dark-skinned beauty who had grown fat with happiness and who smoked big black cigars. Their daughter, Cora, was the prettiest girl in Mabgella and the pride of Peterson's heart. She was as fair as her father—a tall, white-skinned, golden-haired girl, with eyes the color of gentians. It was said that every young man in Magella was in love with her. Sighing suitors were always parading back and forth beneath her windows, preening themselves, hoping that the blond Cora would feel the pangs of passion. But Peterson snubbed all would-be wooers and the cool, snow-white Cora refused to be charmed by dapper, brown dandies, who had so little imagination that they made love to her by calling attention to themselves. Cora had her own conception of love and lovers. All day she sat in the little garden at the back of her father's house, dreaming, woman fashion, of the man who would win her in spite of herself.

Peterson had been in very good humor that morning at the Cafe Albion. He sat for a long time over his glass of brandy, his thoughts busy with the delectable future. And if the dignified royalists who bowed so cordially when they passed his table could have known what he was thinking, there would have been a riot, a revolution, or a civil war in Magella before night. But Peterson's eyes were as guileless as a child's. He was outwardly as mild as a milk-fed god—majestic, Jovian and incorruptible.

He paid for the drink and strolled across the city to the esplanade, his thoughts still busy with the future. John Peterson had something up his sleeve for himself and Cora. His wife didn't matter—she was an unthinking, senseless mound of flesh in a calico print wrapper. He had loved her for a brief, tropic month of moonlight and madness, a long time ago. Twenty years ago. Now there was Cora, tall, fresh-skinned—a goddess in this land of little, swarthy women with straight, black hair! And Peterson did not propose that she should stay in Magella forever. A little longer. Only a little longer! Then he would take her to Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London. They would stay at great hotels. They would go to the races, to Monte Carlo, to the gay watering places. Cora would wear European clothes, and men of fashion would stare at her. He, Peterson, would stroll along the boulevards as he was strolling now, only that upon his head, in place of a broad-brimmed straw hat, he would wear a shining stovepipe, and his majestic body would be clothed, not in crumpled linen, but in broadcloth, excellently tailored. There would be money in his pockets, and Magella, this land of blazing sky, towering mountains, palms, revolutions, and purple sea, would be erased from his memory like a miserable dream. There were ways.

For instance: The royalists might be very much in power, but there were others who aspired to fit into the comfortable niches now filled by Diego and his followers. The nationalists, for example. Beneath the placid surface of daily life in Magella a political volcano was seething. Its center was the Cafe Nazionale. Its inmost heart was Pedro Cammarillo, half-breed Spaniard. Some day there was going to be an eruption. The red-hot revolutionists would blot out Diego's government like a shower of lava and burning cinders. Then there would be an end to Yankee influence in the republic. Cammarillo, the liberator, would occupy the white palace on the plaza. The railway would belong to the country; the fabulous wealth of the Fairchild mines would pour into the national treasury, where it belonged. All of those smiling, frock-coated royalists who had bowed to John Peterson in the Cafe Albion would be shot against the sun-baked walls of the fortress, or thrown into damp dungeons beneath San Martino, or exiled to a life of meditation and remorse in the desolate provinces of the interior.

All these things were scheduled to happen quickly. Peterson smiled under his golden beard when he looked about him at the unsuspecting people. Particularly he smiled when he passed the American consulate and his eyes fell upon the flag which hung in languid folds above the doorway. The American consul, young Fairchild and a handful of Yankee engineers were all that stood between Diego and the silent, purposeful, ruthless army of nationalists which had already flocked to Cammarillo's side.

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THE consul and Pug Fairchild went into the consulate as Peterson passed. He tipped his wide-brimmed hat to them and looked them straight in the eye with a glance both benign and inscrutable.

"A glorious day, gentlemen."

Pug and the consul uncovered reverently before the incorruptible banker. But when he had turned the corner, talking slowly in the shadow of the houses, Pug whistled, glanced up at the cloudless sky, frowned, and said, briefly: "Whiskers!"

Peterson went on, to the esplanade. The Liberta had come in from Porto Bio, bringing a cargo of misfit merchandise, canned goods, phonographs, had a conglomerate assortment of adventurers in the modern style—jewelry merchants, tintype artists, life insurance peddlers, professional soldiers and professional loafers. The first boatload was coming ashore, propelled across the glittering harbor by a sweating crew of half-naked natives. Peterson went down on the beach and watched the landing; he liked to come into contact with the great outside world, the world he had dreamed of for twenty years. Some day he and Cora were going aboard the Liberta, to sail forever out of the harbor, northward to crowded, glittering cities, to civilization, to pleasure. They were almost done with this land of sunshine and languor. They were almost done with the deadly monotony of the honest years.

Just then John Peterson caught sight of a young man who was in charge of one of the Liberta's boats. He was standing upright, shouting to the oarsmen as the overloaded craft shot through the surf and plunged nose-first into the white sand of the beach. A tall, sandy-haired youngster, in a blue flannel shirt and khaki trousers—Peterson looked at him and felt his heart leap in his breast.

"As like as two pennies," he thought, licking his lips.

He tipped his hat over his eyes and strolled down to the water's edge for a better look at the sandy-haired American. The youngster stood at the tiller, shouting orders in a pretty variety of bilingual cuss words, a sort of good-humored, gentle tongue-lashing meant to sting the native boatmen into something like action. They jumped out into the shallow surf, beached the heavy boat, and stood by while the passengers came ashore.

Peterson mingled with the crowd, a towering, conspicuous man of the north. The tropic sun gilded his magnificent beard. And the sandy-haired American, suddenly relaxing to mop his brow with a red bandanna handkerchief, caught sight of the incorruptible banker of Magella. For a moment their graze crossed. Peterson felt a drowning wave of terror, but his face was expressionless. He glanced beyond the American to the open harbor, where the rusty Liberta dozed at anchor. Then he turned on his heel and walked slowly back to his house in the Via Cristoforo. There he stretched himself in his favorite wicker chair, clenched his hands, and gazed with lackluster eyes into the past.

The sandy-haired youngster, in the meantime, had done several astounding things. First he stared after the towering figure of the banker as if he could not believe his eyes. There was smoldering fury, hate and a sort of glad surprise in his glance. He stood rigid by the tiller of the Liberta's boat, unconscious of the burning sun which beat down on the top of his head with the withering intensity of sun plus a magnifying lens. He was like a man struck dumb by a new, great idea, or one who has just realized an overwhelming ambition. Suddenly he leaped into the sand and ran after John Peterson at top speed, leaving the Liberta's landing boat to its fate. The native oarsmen looked after him with startled eyes, then shrugged their shoulders and squatted in the hot sands, to wait until he chose to return. These Americani were always a little pazzi. He would come back—poco tiempo. In such wise, with cowlike patience, they mixed Italian and Spanish and gossiped softly on the rim of the beach.

The sandy-haired youngster reached the esplanade and found that the giant banker had disappeared in one

THE SANDY-HAIRED YOUNGSTER CAUGHT CORA AND WHISPERED IN HER EAR: "I'M COMING BACK FOR YOU. I DON'T LIKE YOUR POP OVERMUCH, BUT I LOVE YOU."

of those twisting alleys which strike toward the heart of the city. He ran back and forth, peering down first one and then another like a hound on the scent. But Peterson was gone. A barefoot policeman in a cocked hat was dozing on a corner and the American accosted him.

"Say! Where's the American consulate in this place?"

The policeman made polite gestures. "Non capisco signore."

"Consulate! American! Why the blazes don't you speak English? Consulato Americano. Here's a cigarette—now open up. I'm in a hurry."

The policeman accepted the cigarette, smiled, shrugged his shoulders and pointed with his thumb toward the Via della Pace.

"I get you," the youngster panted, and ran.

The consul was in. His Indian boy backed away into the patio before the determined onslaught of the sandy-haired American and, introducing the guest with a frightened bob of his head, disappeared into the kitchen. The consul was lying in a hammock, and another young man, very cool and comfortable in white duck clothes, was twanging a guitar in the shadow of a banana tree.

"Hello," the consul said, sitting up sleepily. "What do you want?"

"My name's White," the sandy-haired one gasped. "Second officer of the Liberta. I'm looking for a man—Schmidt—Carl Schmidt. Followed him a block and lost him again. Can you tell me where he lives?"

The consul shook his head. "Sorry, Mr. White. There aren't many Europeans in Magella other than Italians. And your Mr. Schmidt, I judge, is a German. No one here by that name, unless"—he turned to the guitar player questioningly—"unless he happens to be at the railway camp."

"Nope," said the guitar player, briefly, continuing to pluck the strings.

"I saw him!" said White. "I tell you, I followed him for a block. But he got mixed up with the scenery and disappeared. Big, blonde fellow—yellow beard, Panama hat. Turns his feet out like this——"

"Oh, you mean Peterson."

The sandy-haired youngster laughed, an unpleasant laugh full of angry disdain. "So that's what he calls himself. Peterson!" Suddenly he turned to the consul with blazing eyes. "Where does he live? I'm going after him. What's more, I'm going to get him!"

The consul stood up. "I think there must be some mistake," he said quietly. "Mr. Peterson has lived in Magella for twenty years. As far as I know, he has always been called Peterson. He is a banker, a very honest, respectable and trustworthy man. Perhaps the sun——"

"I'm all right," young White answered. "I've been traveling up and down this coast for two years and a little thing like a hot day doesn't make me see things, if that's what you mean. The man I saw down on the beach is not Peterson—his name is Schmidt, and he's a crook."

"Have you ever been in Magella before, Mr. White?"

"No."

"Then how comes it that you recognize a man you have never seen? Peterson hasn't left the city for fifteen years, except to ride as far as the foothills."

The young man smiled. "Well, sir, it's a long story. I won't swear that I'm right. Maybe there are two men in the world who look like Carl Schmidt. But I doubt it. I'd like to tell you——"

"By all means. I'm the consul here. The musical gentleman under the banana tree is known as Fairchild, or, popularly, Signor Pug. He is on his vacation, twiddling his thumbs after three months in the bad lands of the campagna. Anything you say to us will be accepted as strictly confidential."

Pug put down the guitar and lighted a cigarette. "If you've got anything on old gold whiskers," he said politely, "spill it. I am all ears."

Young White mopped his face with his blue flannel sleeve, sat down in one of the consul's home-made rocking chairs, accepted a glass of soda with alacrity, and began to talk. Over on the veranda of his house in the Via Cristoforo, Peterson still sat, rigid and watchful, trembling hands clutching the arms of his chair. He might have been following word for word the story told by the sandy-haired American to Pug Fairchild and the consul. His attitude was that of a man who listens intently; yet the consulate was a quarter of a mile away, separated from Peterson's house by a mass of wandering streets, dobe dwellings, tangled gardens and dusty public squares. An impartial angel pausing a moment above the city of Magella, would have said that Peterson heard, word for word, sentence for sentence, chapter for chapter, the story told in the sun-checkered patio of the consulate.

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FLASH back twenty-five years. The gold and blue and purple of Magella fades into the cinder gray of a prairie town in the United States—a single main street flanked on both sides by one and two storied brick and wooden houses, brand-new, hideously ugly. Horses are tethered before the post office. Farther up the street there is a bank; above the door, written in gold letters three feet high, the names Schmidt & White. In this drab world of dust and prairie Peterson appears again, young, boisterous, bearded. And with him there is a man strangely like the sandy-haired youngster who raced ashore at Magella in one of the Liberta's boats, strangely like, yet older and a little bent. Peterson calls this man Andrew, and Andrew calls Peterson Carl. Andrew White and Carl Schmidt, partners in business, stanch friends.

Carl Schmidt is a dreamer. He hates the flat prarie stretching to every horizon like a becalmed sea; he hates the ugly brick houses, the post office, the saloon, the tethered horses with drooping heads, the heat and dust and deadly monotony. He dreams of adventure in far-off lands—purple seas, palms and snow-white beaches.

Andrew is gentle; he dreams, but his dreams are of a prosperous future. He sees the prairie town become a great city; he sees Schmidt and White honored and rich. Andrew is married and lives with his wife and little son in a neat white house near the bank.

The sandy-haired youngster is talking to the consul at Magella. Over in the Via Cristoforo John Peterson sits motionless, listening.

"It was like this, Mr. Consul. My father trusted Schmidt. Once he went away to Chicago—a long journey in those days—and left Schmidt in charge of the bank. When he came home, he found that Schmidt had eloped with all the money he could lay his hands on. He had fixed the books. He had cleaned out the safe. He was gone! And he hadn't left a footprint in the prairie sands."

Young White met the consul's eyes squarely. "I saw Schmidt on the beach twenty minutes ago. How did I know him? I grew up with the hate of him in my heart. My father had a photograph of him on the mantelshelf in the parlor, and about once a day he'd point to it and say: 'That's the man who ruined me.' It was true. He carried the burden of Schmidt's crime until he died. I've been something of a traveler. I've knocked about the globe for four years, keeping my eyes open for tall, blond men with curly beards. Now I've found him."

The consul shook his head. "Peterson may be Carl Schmidt, or again he may be the sixth son of a Swedish earl. He came here twenty years ago full of money and pleasant ways, and married a native woman. If I remember rightly, she was called Maria Teresa Ulloa San Martino de Vega, none of which was her rightful name. They lived at Numero 6, Via Cristoforo. You might drop around and take another look at Peterson.

The sandy-haired youngster put down the empty glass and offered the consul his hand. "Thanks," he said briefly, "I will."

When he had gone the consul and Pug exchanged a look full of understanding. Pug rose from his lounging position beneath the banana tree, found his hat, and followed the youngster to the water front. White jumped into the Liberta's boat and was rowed swiftly across the harbor.

Then Pug found a bench in the shadow of the dusty trees along the esplanade, and, tipping his hat over his eyes, sat down to wait. He waited all the afternoon, strewing cigarette stubs around the bench and whistling antique comic opera tunes. He was homesick for trolley cars, asphalt, gasoline and hurrying crowds, the pungent essence of civilization. Magella was growing dull. There was nothing to disturb the changeless monotony of the changeless days except an occasional scrap at the railway camp and a Sunday bullfight in the Arena Goldoni. Here, between the toppling mountains and the purple sea, the white city dozed like a pretty woman in eternal siesta. Decidedly, life was stale.

Pug waited until the orange sunset had faded into dusk, partly because he mistrusted the fiery look in the sandy-haired youngster's eyes, principally because he believed Peterson to be Schmidt. Night had fallen, like a blanket quenching the last glow of twilight, before he heard again the steady click of oars and the ripple of water against the prow of a small boat. White was coming back!

Pug saw him when he crossed the esplanade, appearing for an instant in the round pool of light cast by a street lamp, then disappearing again into the thick shadow of the waterfront buildings. Loosening the revolver in his pocket, Pug rose from his patient vigil and followed.

White turned into the Via Cristoforo and hesitated before Numero. 6 to light a cigarette. Two of Cora's suitors were strolling back and forth, their eyes fixed on the grilled windows of the banker's house. White passed them and hurried around the corner into a narrow alleyway which touched upon Peterson's garden. He scanned the high wall, made a quick leap, gained the top and dropped silently into the tangled foliage on the other side.

"I thought so," Pug whispered, smiling in the dark. He waited a moment; then he followed, landing in the comnet branches of a flowering hedge. The garden was as dark as the inside of a closet. Not a star burned in the sky. Only in the palm fronts a whole ballet of fireflies danced to inaudible music. White had disappeared like a man fallen into the bottom of a deep well. If he had heard Pug climb over the wall, he gave no sign—he was somewhere in that tangle of bushes and vines, watching for the incorruptible one.

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SUDDENLY a door opened, a shaft of yellow light fell across the darkness, and Peterson came out on the veranda, followed by a short, swarthy man in a crumpled uniform—Capt. dal Re, commander of the Liberta. They glanced around with the air of conspirators, then Peterson waved the Italian to a chair and sat down facing him, directly in the path of light. He whispered, and his words floated out over the garden and kindled an unholy joy in the breast of Signor Pug. The banker spat the name "Fairchild" with venom and disdain; he spoke of the "despised and already defeated royalists, slaves of the Americans, traitors to Magella." He whispered to the estimable captain of revolutionary troops waiting at Porto Bio to pounce upon Magella; he whispered of guns and ammunition, of loot, of treachery, of thefts and awards. Finally, hitching his chair closer to Dal Re, he hatched a preposterous plot.

"MY NAME IS FAIRCHILD. I MEAN WHAT I SAY. YOU'RE GOING TO RUN THE LIBERIA ASHORE ON SAND ISLAND. MR. WHITE WILL COMMUNICATE WITH THE ENGINE ROOM."

"Senti, capitano," he said, for they were speaking Italian. "There are only a dozen men who keep Diego where he is—that Signor Pug, the consul, Bianchi, McCarthy, and the engineers at Dora Riparia. Figure it for yourself. Once the liberator is in the city, the whole population will swing to our side. Then——" The incorruptible one leaned back in his chair, hooked his thumbs under his suspenders, and smiled behind the golden glory of his beard.

The little captain glanced away with a troubled frown. "There are loyal troops."

"Asleep! Asleep! Drugged with idleness and too much security. My dear fellow, all you have to do is to take the troops aboard at Porto Bio, bring them into Magella harbor at night, and wait for your reward. It will be ample."

Still the captain demurred, shuffling his feet and waving his hands. "Suppose my crew——"

"You can buy your crew. See here." From an inside pocket the banker produced a roll of bills; a roll so fat, so compact, so crisp, that Dal Re's eyes started from his head. "Amply sufficient," he said, thickly, suddenly collapsing into an attitude of abject humility. The roll passed from Peterson's hand into the captain's and disappeared with surprising rapidity into his pocket. "Viva la liberta!" he said, rising and clicking his heels together. "Viva Cammarillo! Abbasso Diego, nemico della liberta!"

Peterson got to his feet. "I will come aboard tomorrow," he said. "A rivederci."

Pug heard a rustling in the grass, a quick gasp that was like a child's sob. Peterson's back was turned, and he stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the flood of yellow light. Pug rolled over, groped blindly, and jerked a pistol out of White's hands. "Ssh, you fool," he whispered, winding his arms about the sandy-haired youngster and preventing any foolish exuberance. "I know a better way than that."

They waited, breathing hard, until Peterson and the captain of the Liberta had passed into the house. Somewhere within they heard the faint tinkle of Cora's guitar and a high, sweet voice singing "Don Pasqual."

Pug loosened his hold on the passionate avenger of old wrongs. "Simple-hearted nephew of Uncle Sam," he whispered, "the obsequies are not yet. Do you understand Italian? No? Your enemy, Carl Schmidt, has been frying his own goose. He has been spinning his own shroud. He is as good as dead already. Pocket your little gun and listen to me. My name is Fairchild. I mean what I say. I will deliver thine enemy into thine hands shorn, plucked and trussed." He glanced at the empty veranda, then up at the garden wall. "The next move," he said, "is in the direction of the Cafe Albion. The drinks are on me, but the joke is on Carl Schmidt."

Five minutes later Peterson came out into the garden. He glanced up at the velvet-black sky and down at the riot of tropical flowers and plants. "Funny," he thought. "He was as like him as one penny to another, as one pin to another."

Suddenly he turned and went back into the house, calling in a loud, frightened voice: "Cora! Cora! Where are you?"

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AT noon of the following day there was the beginning of great activity in the harbor. A cargo of fruit was going aboard the Liberta. The winches rattled and screamed. Clusters of top-heavy native lighters clung like barnacles to the steamer's sides. On the bridge Capt. dal Re paced back and forth, nervously chewing a long black cigar. For the first time in Magellan shipping history, the Liberta was being loaded at top speed.

Young White, second officer and general utility man, stood on the forward deck, superintending at close range the lowering of the cargo into the hold. His language was picturesque and forceful, but he grinned every time he glanced into the open hatch. A gang of dirty, half-naked, wholly disreputable natives were slaving in the hold. One of them, of powerful build, more or less invisible beneath a coat of sweat and dirt, displayed a set of dazzling teeth whenever he caught sight of the second officer, and when the last bunch of bananas had been lowered into the Liberta he told her in detail why she was the prettiest girl in South America. His wooing was sudden, immediate and irresistible, in the impetuous manner of his kind. He kindled dreams in the tall goddess' cool eyes. He waxed so eloquent that he might have stormed the citadel of her heart then and there had Peterson not descended from the bridge to carry his daughter off to bed.

The sandy-haired youngster was not cast down. He hurried away to the forward deck, whistling, and shoved off a manhole cover, ostensibly for ventilation. The rusty Liberta was rising and falling to a slow ground swell, and with every dip of the bow a shower of foam exploded high into the air and flung back across the decks. Glancing up, White saw the captain's cigar glowing on the bridge; above him the mist light swayed against a sky as black and dense as a velvet pall. The second officer lighted a cigarette and squatted by the opening. And presently, throwing back his head, he began to sing. If the captain had cared to listen to the words of the ditty, he might have learned a thing or two. For this is what the youngster said:

"Hey, you, down there. All right?"

A hoarse whisper rose from the steaming hold. "Hot as hell. How is everything?"

"I've been talking to Peterson's daughter," caroled the youngster in a passionate tenor voice. "She's a peach. A peach. A peach. And with such a dad! * * * Oh, la! la! la! They're going to Porto Bio, she says, for a visit! She's as innocent as Mary's lamb—la, la!"

"Listen! I saw Diego. His army is four days' march from Magella—annual maneuvers. No one in the city who can use a popgun. * * * A small force at the fort. Peterson knew! The Liberta is going back there tomorrow with a cargo of revolutionists. Cammarillo himself is marching down from the hills. * * * Sing, you fool—sing!"

"Good Lord!" warbled the youngster. "That's fierce. It's all up then? Oh, tra, la, la!"

"Not on your life. Where's whiskers?"

"Gone to bed-o."

"Let him bribe you, d'you hear? Play up. Pat him on the back. Smile, even if your hate chokes you. I telegraphed McCarthy at the mines. They'll cut cross-country to meet Cammarillo. We'll have to hold up Peterson's cargo of toy soldiers somehow."

"How?" Oh, how, old dear? Two of us against an army? You make me sick—you make me awfully sick, la, la."

"If we don't," the hoarse whisperer warned, "something terrible is going to happen to Magella. Go to bed, and let me think. But, for God's sake, don't give me away." The song ceased abruptly, and the useful second officer closed the manhole again. He did not go to bed that night, but sat on a stanchion, watching the explosions of phosphorus, inaudible and dazzling, which stirred the racing sea. At dawn he went to the bridge. Dal Re was still there, his uniform more crumpled than ever, his quenched cigar chewed to a pulp.

"Good morning," he said in feeble English, "you sing, like those little birds last night, Signor Why-Eat."

"I am musical by disinclination," confessed the second officer, smiling. "I was singing the hymn of liberty."

"Liberta!" whispered Dal Re, pounding his breast with both clenched hands. "I, too, love the liberty! I, too, am patriot. The little countries—they, what you call, step on my hearts. Too long have Magella been under the foot of the tyrant crushed. I weep!"

"Ah," said the sandy-haired youngster, coming nearer and lowering his voice. "How's that? Any trouble in Magella?"

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THE captain winked solemnly. "You love the liberty?"

"How much is it worth?"

"One hundred dollars."

"Not enough."

"Two hundred."

"You're on. Veeva! What's the game?"

Dal Re stepped close to his second officer and whispered: "Listen. Big revolution in Magella, fra—two days. We go in to Porto Bio tonight and get 2,000 men with guns. Take them back. No one knows. Make to enter the port at dark. Ssh! No one hears. Land at customhouse. Capture city. Easy. Like that! All for the liberty. Day beyond tomorrow all royalists are dead and all nationalists are rich. Ebbene."

"Anything you say. It listens well. I'd rather be a rich nationalist than a dead royalist. Give me the two hundred."

Dal Re sighed and stripped some green bills from the fat wad he carried in the inside pocket of his dirty linen jacket. The sun had bounced above the horizon like an enormous jack-in-the-box, and the sea was a mad dance of little waves gilded on their crested tips.

All day the Liberta churned her way across the brilliant sea beneath a sky as blazing blue as the inside of a sapphire cup. A ribbon of smoke rolled back from the funnel and hung like a black cable above the water. The wind had dropped; it was sweltering hot beneath the canvas deck awnings. Peterson slept, his head thrown back, his glorious beard pointed heavenward. He was dreaming of Paris—cool fountains, tulips in bloom, pretty women. Himself—Peterson—driving in the Bois with Cora at his side. Perfume. Elegance. Beauty. No more of this smiting, metallic sun and tropic languor. No more fat wife in a cotton wrapper. * * * Every now and then, waking with a start, the incorruptible one heard with a vague uneasiness the murmur of voices.

Cora and the second officer were standing side by side, watching the spray of flying fish away from the Liberta's slicing prow. Funny, how like the youngster was * * * What had the captain called him? Why-Eat? Why-Eat? White! Peterson felt again the drowning wave of terror. Cora and the youngster were looking into one another's eyes; their shoulders touched—— He should have left her at home; danger or no danger, she would have been safer in the garden of Numero 6 than here with that laughing chap who was so damnably like * * *

Cora was paying no attention to him. She had found the end of the rainbow in the sandy-haired youngster's ardent eyes.

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TOWARD night land rose out of the ocean like a heap of fantastic storm clouds. The Liberta turned at right angles and before the last of the twilight had flickered out, poked her nose into the deep harbor of Porto Bio.

The town itself was a mere handful of white houses strung like a pearl necklace along the shore. A score of bonfires flared on the beach, and as the anchor of the fruit steamer was let go and she came to rest, a strange sound reached the ears of passengers and crew.

Even in the hold, where he crouched behind concealing mounds of green bananas, the disreputable cargador heard and wondered. At first it sounded like the dripping of gigantic drops of water from some stupendous tap. Then it was like the barking of dogs or the yelping of a pack of wolves. And finally the medley of noises resolved itself into human voices—the excited chatter of thousands of men.

Straining his eyes, the sandy-haired youngster made out the moving forms of Cammarillo's warriors silhouetted against the ruddy glow of the camp fires. And rushing to the closed hatch, as if he had been seized by a transport of joy, he danced a few ecstatic steps. The cargador listened:

"Troops," this strange terpsichorean Morse code said. "Coming aboard tonight. We are going to lose our precious necks. But I'm with you. Better a dead royalist than a live nationalist."

Having spoken, the second officer hurried back to duty. The passengers were going ashore, putting off in a native boat from the Liberta's side ladder. The sandy-haired youngster caught Cora at the top of the steps and whispered in her ear: "I'm coming back for you. I don't like your pop overmuch, but I love you. Are you going to wait for me?"

The look Miss Peterson gave him would have convinced any save a blind man. She squeezed his hand and followed the incorruptible banker into the landing boat. Once she turned and waved to the second officer. Then the shadows swallowed her and she was gone.

All night the Liberta quivered under the feet of Cammarillo's fighting men. They swarmed up the sides and spread themselves over the decks, the cabins, the saloon and the rigging—barefooted, dark, careless men, wearing huge sombreros with chocolate-cream crowns.

They were so burdened with artillery that they rattled when they moved. Each one carried a long-barreled Winchester, a revolver and an assortment of knives. Cammarillo, the liberator, was not with them. He had cut the wires between the capital and Porto Bio and had left the embarkation of troops to Peterson, rushing away on horseback to join the major portion of his command in the foothills. It was his intention to march into Magella from the north while the Liberta, contingent was engaged on the water front. He knew that Diego's little army was scattered to the four points of the compass and not likely to fire a shot against the superior nationalist force. It was a pretty game of ring-around-a-rosy, and the half-breed Spaniard calculated on being in the palace, president and dictator, within a week.

The Liberta sailed at dawn, incrusted with men and so overloaded that her decks were almost flush with the sea.

Peterson was on the bridge, majestic, clad in white from head to foot, the deus ex machina of the revolution. He borrowed the captain's glasses and made out Cora standing on the veranda of the commandante's house, where Peterson had left her "until the cause was won." Cora had doubts about the cause, but she waved, stretching out her arms in a gesture not meant for her father, but for the sandy-haired youngster who had promised to come back for her. What was Paris compared to the mystery and radiance of life with a man who had made her fall in love with him in one day and a half?

The Liberta plowed south again across a steaming sea. The funnel belched black smoke. The rusty propeller kicked up snow-white plumes of foam.

She was hurrying down the sea at top speed, in order to enter Magella harbor in that impenetrable hour just before the break of dawn. All day the jaded nationalists hugged the meager shadow of the awnings or lay full length on the hatches, their bare feet pointed heavenward. And the sandy-haired youngster watched with something like fear in his heart. He danced no more above the hidden cargador's head. Instead, he hung over the rail, biting his nails and staring out to sea.

Two men against 2,000—it looked like a big deal. One thing he knew—he would trip Peterson. Then he would go back for that girl, and tell her the truth. If he could——

The sun was quenched at last, like a fallen rocket. A cool mist rose, the unmistakable odor of the drenched and tropical land. The nationalists began to stir. They shouted. They sang. And fearful bilingual oaths split the air.

There was a constant rattle of arms—ominous and businesslike. The Liberta rode into the gathering darkness without lights quivering as she sensed the peril of the adventure.

* * * *

THE second officer, wandering forward, opened the hatches with ostentatious care for the cargo—a cargo not likely to reach its destination. While he was fumbling there in the darkness, the disreputable cargador slipped out on the deck and fell immediately into the relaxed attitude of a sleeping nationalist.

It was done so quickly that the second officer could not be certain that the stowaway had left the hold. To the captain's angry shout from the bridge: "Close the hatches, there!" he answered cheerfully: "Aye, aye, sir," and obeyed with alacrity. Then he went slowly aft to his own quarters, conscious of the soft pad of bare feet behind him. The cargador slipped into the little cabin like a shadow; closing the door and catching White's arm, he whispered:

"Give me some water! Mine's all gone. It was hot as blazes down there. What's up?"

"That you, Mr. Fairchild?"

"Me. Where are we?"

"Off the capo at 3 o'clock."

"Who's on the bridge?"

"Schmidt and the captain.

"Have you got that gun?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't think you'll need to use it. Listen! I have a hunch."

They whispered, sitting side by side on the edge of the second officer's berth. The cargador whispered to White, and White whispered back, tense and ardent as two conspirators in a melodrama.

Outside, the nationalists squatted on their heels, sharpening their knives, and their wits for the impending fray. Off to the south, Magella slept beneath the velvet-black sky, innocent as a cradled babe. Diego's army was hot-footing it through the forests. Cammarillo, the liberator, bore down from the hills. There was nothing to prevent the downfall of the government, except time—time the impetuous. The hours passed, and the over-laden Liberta, feeling her way through the impenetrable darkness, approached the Capo light, passed beneath it, and turned at right angles into the wide mouth of the harbor. A sudden babel of voices rose from the steamer's crowded decks and died away again like a passing flurry of wind. Thereafter Cammarillo's nationalists stood motionless and silent, straining their eyes toward the faint lights of the city.

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THERE was nothing to prevent the second officer from going to the bridge. He went, followed closely by his shadow—both of them invisible in the smothering blackness of that mysterious hour which comes just before the dawn.

Peterson and Dal Re were watching the channel intently. Now and then a bell rang, the steamer trembled, stopped, then slid forward again, feeling her way between the encroaching reefs.

"We will take her to the customs wharf," Dal Re whispered.

"Bene," Peterson answered in a calm voice.

Just then both of them became conscious of a gentle pressure in the middle of their backs, as if a cold finger had been laid upon their spines with insinuating intentions. They shivered and turned to confront the second officer and his disreputable shadow. The pressure was relieved and applied again to the region of their hearts. The shadow spoke:

"My name is Fairchild. I mean what I say. You're going to run the Liberta ashore on Sand Island. Mr. White will communicate to the engine room. If you shout, wriggle, or wink, I'll blow your heads off. Nothing easier. The guns of the fortress of San Martino are trained on Sand Island, and the royalist forces know when to expect you. They are only waiting for a signal from me—a shot, for instance—to blow you out of the harbor."

"Preposterous," Peterson whispered.

The captain, flinging his arms above his head, groaned like a man who has had a sudden vision of a sun-baked wall, a squad of soldiers, and the leveled barrels of a dozen rifles pointed at his own heart.

"Maledetta!" he said under his breath. "These damned Yankees."

The shadow answered, pleasantly: "Maledetta! Carrambos! Likewise by heck! Listen for your cues, Capt. dal Re. And you, Mr. Schmidt, control your exuberant nature. Now, White, take her in."

The Liberta slid smoothly forward. Straight ahead the diamond-strung lights along the esplanade swung suddenly to the left. A bell rang, faint and far away. Then another. The lights swung to the right as the Liberta turned. There was no sound save the cautious rattle of the eager nationalists' artillery and the ripple of water along the steamer's rusty sides. The bell rang again, sharply, almost triumphantly, and the Liberta, quivering and thrashing like a wounded whale, ran her nose deep into the invisible sands of the Isola di Sab-

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